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Work to provide public access to more than a mile-long stretch of bluffs along Lake Michigan will begin next spring.

An agreement signed Tuesday by the U.S. Navy and Openlands Project, a Chicago-based, non-profit conservation group, eventually will result in a multimillion-dollar restoration of the bluffs and ravines and create a 77-acre park.

"It's just an incredible thing that we'll have the opportunity to protect this for the public," said Joyce O'Keefe, Openlands' associate director. "One of the things that makes me very excited is developing a trail along the top of the bluff."

Situated at the southern end of Fort Sheridan, the area was owned by the U.S. Army for more than a century. The former military base was decommissioned in 1993, with half the property redeveloped into an upscale neighborhood known as the Town of Fort Sheridan.

The other half, which includes the shoreline, 60-foot bluffs and the ravines that connect them, was given to the Navy for housing Great Lakes Naval Station personnel. That area is considered ecologically significant as home to five endangered or threatened plant species and an estimated 100 species of birds.

Unlike the swamp and bog shoreline in the Chicago area, the bluffs here were carved by glaciers resulting in a unique landscape along Illinois' 60 miles of lakefront. Access to a narrow, rocky beach and shoreline was restricted to military personnel.

When developers showed interest in the bluff area, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park two years ago pushed a law providing the Navy transfer ownership to Openlands.

"One of the advantages of looking at preservation on this site is that for 100 years, the U.S. Army and then U.S. Navy did nothing," Kirk said. "The last thing we needed was a set of high rises."

The land adjoins Lake County forest preserve holdings, which together amount to about 2 miles of lake frontage. Illinois has 60 miles of shoreline, but less than half of that is open to the public, according to Openlands.

Openlands will acquire the property at no cost in three stages, but the process may take until late 2009. The first encompasses the beach and the face of the bluffs and will occur no later than Nov. 1. That timeline was necessary because Openlands does not want to accept any land until any structures are removed.

The park will be known as Openlands Lakefront Preserve at Fort Sheridan. A public opening date has not been set.

O'Keefe said the development of the trail system, interpretive signage and restoration work will be expensive.

"What we know is it will be several million dollars at least," she said. "What we intend to do is initiate a major fundraising campaign."